

PLANT OF THE WEEK

July 22, 2008

Blue Evergreen Hydrangea or Chinese Quinine *Dichroa febrifuga*

Just a scheduling reminder: Tomorrow Friday July 25, we will be hosting another Music in the Garden event. Come join us as we celebrate mid-summer. Please bring an instrument, your voice and an interest in gardening and horticulture. We will be giving at least one tour of the greenhouses and the outside gardens. Start your weekend off right in the Happy Present Tense. The next one is August 8. As a matter of fact, I'm referring to that date as the Tardy Traveler (Ohwait, ohwait, ohwait). We shall celebrate this auspicious date with a special Marsh Gardens treat that I will elucidate in the next article.

Our plant this week was one of those choices I make every year to stretch my gardening limbs as it were, to try something new and unheard of, at least in my meager experience. I bought this plant from my favorite nursery, Forest Farm in Oregon. I know it comes a long way, and I know the carbon footprint is outrageous. But unless I can find a nursery with similar range of plants, at the same quality I am compelled to continue my relationship with them. I have purchased a few plants from nurseries hereabouts, and long time readers will note that I have mentioned one or two over the years. Without casting asparagus on any commercial entity, I have had more than a few poorly dug, badly balled-and-burlapped and weed-infested trees and shrubs delivered up into my hands. It is standard practice to walk through the nursery and identify specific plants that you wish them to dig for you. A plastic tag or piece of tape is affixed to the plant and at their convenience, it is dug up and balled-and-burlapped. Great care must be taken to dig the plant correctly, getting as much of the main root system as possible, not contacting the bark with a shovel and then applying the burlap in a way that makes it easy to move the plant. I have seen trees and shrubs dropped off of trailers onto pavement by nursery employees who handle hundreds of heavy plants a day and pass a certain point where the care and gentleness that a plant requires is something that they are no longer capable of. I do not blame the line workers in this case, but have learned that the larger a nursery is, the more likely you will receive a less-than-perfect plant. Search out the plant enthusiasts, the small operations, where their names are prominent and accountability is assured. Buy from them and your success is more assured.

Our plant is a member of the Hydrangea family, Hydrangeaceae. Its nativity is Nepal eastwards to southern China and into Southeast Asia. It is a forest-edge plant, with great degrees of tolerance for sun to light shade, types of soil from clay to sandy soils, and even pH of the soil, being equally adaptable in acid or alkaline soils. This medium sized shrub gets about six feet in height with a spread of about two-thirds that. Its serrated ridged leaves are evergreen in mild climates (Zone 7 and higher) but it's semi-evergreen for me here, although it is protected from the worst of winter's weather. The

leaves will re-appear in spring, and in mid-summer to early fall, the blue flowers, reminiscent of its kin, provide a nice blue or mauve. This color is very dependent on soil pH, because the ability to up-take aluminum is key in the flower color ranging into the pinks. Given a low pH, the flower colors stay distinctly blue. This is also true of other Hydrangeas.

This plant has great healing powers according to the proponents of Chinese medicine. It is used as a purgative, a febrifuge, emetic and an expectorant. It is also used in the treatment of stomach cancer, coughs, colds and bronchitis and to treat indigestion. It is 26 times more powerful than quinine in the treatment of malaria, but causes severe nausea. It is considered to be one of the 50 fundamental herbs.

As I have just this short experience with Dichroa, having just planted it last fall, I don't have a lot more to say about it. I'll try and keep you up-to-date on its development. Better yet, you can come visit the gardens tomorrow and have a gander at it yourself.

My very best to you all, and hope to see you soon,

Eric



This somewhat bleached-out shot of Dichroa shows the Hydrangea flowers in bud and just beginning to swell.



Dichroa febrifuga in the late afternoon sun shows the leaf structure that indicates its linkage to *Hydrangea*.

Liquid Sunshine and Plant of the Week are written for e-mail readers on average of once a week. The opinions and views expressed therein are the sole responsibility of the author. Yale University and Marsh Botanical Garden are not responsible for the inane and sometimes off the chart craziness of this publication. Contact us at eric.larson@yale.edu or Marsh Botanical Garden, 165 Prospect Street, Room 114 OML, New Haven, CT 06511